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AUTHOR Bliss, Bill
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ABSTRACT

Two myths often surround discussions of literacy in the United States: (1) that the current school reform movement benefits minority students; and (2) that a technological and information age has emerged that requires new, higher literacy levels. Neither is accurate, for there is no economic imperative for the improvement of literacy, only an urgent social imperative. The implications for enhancing parent involvement include: (1) having realistic expectations about the capabilities of the parents; (2) realizing that immigrant and refugee children often pick up English and become Americanized much more quickly than their parents; (3) understanding that the children who need help the most are those who do not have a parent available to become involved; (4) making educational programs part of a larger array of support systems and services; (5) being aware of a key distinction between immigrant populations and students born and raised in American language minority neighborhoods; (6) focusing our energy and programs at the junior high and middle school levels, where children are a captive audience and still exploring their options; and (7) working in partnership with the private sector in our communities. (MSE)

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LITERACY AND THE LIMITED ENGLISH POPULATION: A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Bill Bliss

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LITERACY AND THE LIMITED ENGLISH POPULATION: A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Bill Bliss
Language & Communication Associates
Washington, D.C.

In recent weeks, we have had our attention called on more than one occasion to the literacy needs of the nation's Limited-English-Proficient (LEP) population.

First, we have learned the results of an English language proficiency survey commissioned by the Department of Education and conducted by the Census Bureau in 1982. The survey suggests that between 17 and 21 million U.S. adults are illiterate. That's about 13 percent of the U.S. adult population. The results are controversial. Critics have problems with the test that was used, and many feel that the statistics are too conservative and downplay the enormity of the illiteracy problem. Indeed, earlier studies have suggested an illiteracy rate as high as 20 percent, but let's keep in mind that prior to this the Census Bureau estimated that less than four percent of adults were illiterate. That mythical figure was based on the number of adults with less than six years of schooling, a definition of literacy that I venture to say everyone in this room would take issue with.

If you're like me, you're dismayed by this fixation with numbers. A phenomenal amount of professional and national energy is devoted to counting the number of illiterates in this population. Is anybody going to sleep any better if we knew that instead of 2.7 million, there are only 2.1 million illiterates in our society? Of course not. As it is, our current adult basic education programs only serve about 2½ million people in any given year. No matter how large we may believe the illiterate population to be, we are educating a disgracefully small percentage of it.

A few more points worth noting about the Census Bureau survey. It identified certain key factors with the illiterate population. Two of these are immigration and the reliance on a non-English language at home. Thirty-seven percent of the adults classified as illiterate don't speak English at home. And of those, 82% were born outside the United States, 21% entered the country within the previous six years, and 42% are living in neighborhoods in which a language other than English is predominant. And perhaps most compelling: up to 86% of the non-English speakers who are illiterate in English are also illiterate in their native language. This has profound implications for our parent involvement to efforts, which I'll return later.

There has been a second recent occasion for us to be alerted to the needs of the limited-English proficient. The issue of Education Week dated May 14, contained a special pull-out section on the U.S. school populations. The cover was a photograph which showed a large number of school children walking out the door and down the steps of their school: books in hand, sneakers on feet, and big smiles on their faces. The faces in that photograph sent message, the happy faces of Blacks, Hispanics, Asians and other minority children, walking toward us, the reader, under a banner headline that read, "Here They Come, Ready or Not!" There were two or three white faces in the photograph, but there was no mistaking the message; "they" referred to the ethnic and minority children who are making up a growing proportion of our school population.

Some of the information in the report was illuminating. Of the 3.6 million children who will start their school years next September, one out of four will be living at the poverty-level, 15% will be immigrants who speak a language other than English, and 10% will have parents who are illiterate or lack previous education.

Immigration patterns and birthrates are transforming our school population and will in subsequent years transform our society. Currently, about 21% of our population is Black, Hispanic and Asian. Around the year 2000, these groups will be about one-third of our population. Half a million or so immigrants and refugees come to our shores each year. Another half a million or so, nobody has reliable data, come to us as undocumented entrants. A million newcomers each year, representing a rich diversity of languages, cultures and experiences. Forty percent of legal immigrants are coming from Asia, another 40% from Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean. Of the undocumented entrants, 50% are coming from Mexico, and 25% from Central and South American countries.

This surely isn't news in the metropolitan areas of New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco, Washington, D.C., Anaheim, Miami, San Jose, Boston or Oakland. Almost half the nation's legal immigrants are locating in these communities.

Birthrates are also contributing to the growing ethnic diversity in our schools. White American women currently have a fertility rate of 1.7 children per lifetime, much lower than the rate in our language-minority populations. And White America is getting older, while Minority America has never looked younger. The average White American is 31 years old; the average Black is 25; and the average Hispanic is only 23.

The combination of immigration and birthrate factors is creating dramatic changes in our schools, especially in the early grades. We can learn a lot about the future of our society by looking at the generation entering their school years, the generation that will pass through our educational system and emerge from it at the turn of this century. The mirror that next year's kindergartners and first graders hold up to us shows us a nation that will be profoundly more diverse in its ethnicity and language in the year 2000.

Even today, in 1986, the nation's limited-English-speaking population is a fascinating mosaic of diverse peoples. According to the 1980 Census, 64% of the total LEP population in the United States speaks Spanish at home. About one out of four Hispanics report speaking English not well or not at all. A report by the National Commission for Employment Policy estimates that about 70% of children ages 5 to 14 who live in Spanish-speaking households have limited-English proficiency. And up to 46% of those ages 14 to 21 have trouble with the language.

The Hispanic communities across the nation are of course very diverse. Mexican Americans, the vast majority living in California or Texas, may be recent arrivals or descendants of families that date back generations. We need only read our newspapers to know that the present Mexican economy is in distress, that the inflation and unemployment rates are an incredible burden on the Mexican population. Many economists believe that the option to temporarily or permanently move north across the border is an escape-valve that is absolutely essential to Mexico's stability. Mexico needs to produce about 750,000 new jobs a year just to keep unemployment at it presently high levels. This is unlikely, an we must be realistic and expect a continued flow across the border.

Puerto Ricans, living primarily in New York and New Jersey, are often characterized as having a so-called "sojourner" orientation, moving back and forth between mainland and island, either physically or psychically. This sense of impermanence of the living situation may contribute to the economic hardship experienced by this population. Fully half of mainland Puerto Ricans have annual incomes less than $10,000, and almost half of those are below $5,000.

Cuban Americans, centered in Florida, with other concentrations in New Jersey, New York and California, have very diverse circumstances. The refugees of the early sixties were predominantly from the business and professional classes. They have thrived economically, integrated into the society, their children are for the most part fully bilingual and with a higher-than-average educational level. The situation is quite different for the so-called Marielitos, the 125,000 who arrived in the 1980 boatlift. These entrants were certainly not from the same well-heeled families as those who came two decades before, but neither were most of them the criminals and mentally ill individuals that the media made them out to be. This population still has significant adjustment and educational needs, several years after their arrival.

The Central American entrants are in a sense most in need of our attention, and least likely to get it. They are for the most part undocumented. They come to us primarily from small towns in rural Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador. They have little previous exposure to an urban setting. Their level of previous education is low. They are often unable to read or write in their native language. They are overwhelmingly young men who suddenly find themselves not only in a new land with a new language, but for the first time they are living outside the structure and security of their home and family. It's rather ironic that, by law, we must educate the children, while the parents shy away from contact with us, preferring the security of low visibility.

The other significant group in the limited-English population are the various Asian communities. The year 1965 saw the relaxation of immigration policies that had previously excluded most Asian applicants. And the year 1975 of course brought the beginning of the flow of Southeast Asian refugees to our shores. The immigrants are Chinese, Korean and Japanese, and we have read recently in our national press about their legendary educational attainments. Adult Asian immigrants to this country are twice as likely as native-born Americans to have attended college.

In terms of English language ability, the Asian immigrant groups do well. Census data suggests that only 20% of all U.S. Japanese and 30% of all Chinese and Koreans are limited-English-proficient.

The success of these immigrant groups sometimes tends to blind us to the difficulties experienced by the Southeast Asian refugees, still flowing into our country from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Southeast Asian refugee men arrive in this country with an average of 6½ years of previous education. The women have less than four years. Members of the Hmong hilltribes from Laos average less than 1½ years schooling, and have little or no exposure to a written code of language.

While the first wave of refugees a decade ago was a more urban and educated population, the waves that have followed have brought us farmers and fishermen, a predominantly rural population that actually has many similarities to the newcomers from Central America. Native language literacy rates are low, and there

has often been little or no exposure to an urban setting. The children have often had little or no education, no surprise when a generation of childhoods has been shattered by war at home, perilous escapes, and months or years of languishing in refugee camps.

So these are the key groups we are serving, Hispanic and Asian communities that make up about 3/4 of the nation's limited-English speaking population. Of course there are others: Haitians, Afghans, Ethiopians, East Europeans. They are fewer in number, but their needs can be as great.

What now exactly do we mean by literacy when we talk about the educational needs of this population? Predictably enough, the usual definitions of literacy refer to the literacy needs of the nation's English-speaking population: the need to read, write and compute well enough to be able to function in the community and on the job. We're aware though that many Americans manage to "get by" without these skills, by using spoken language or the assistance of friends, coworkers, or family members. The limited-English speaker doesn't have this capacity to "get by," because he doesn't possess the ability to listen to, comprehend and produce the spoken language necessary to meet basic survival needs of everyday life. We might say then that this speaking ability is a prerequisite or foundation for the development of literacy skills in the limited-English population.

Speaking and listening skills are indeed at the heart of the most basic classes in English as a Second language (ESL). Professionals have as their primary goal the development of students' communicative competence. Reading may initially be dealt with only through practice in the recognition of key sign words such as those found on emergency and warning signs. Writing may consist essentially of practice in filling out simple personal information on forms. Literacy instruction as it is provided to the English speaker is an inaccessible luxury to the non-English speaker who does not yet possess the ability to engage in simple conversation in the language.

The two major national literacy volunteer organizations understand this. Both Laubach Literacy Action and Literacy Volunteers of America have special teaching materials, training manuals and orientation programs for volunteers who will be teaching ESL literacy to their students. These materials are essentially communicative, and prepare students to eventually access the other literacy instruction that is more focussed on reading and writing.

Those who work primarily with children may ask: Where does this ESL instruction take place for the parents of my students? Chances are it takes place in a local adult basic education program. Nationwide, such programs serve about 600,000 ESL students annually. They can be found in remarkably diverse settings: public schools, community colleges, vocational and technical schools, and adult education centers. Refugee resettlement funds also allow for a limited number of programs often operated by social service agencies, churches and other community organizations.

Funding for adult English language education has never been great, and Gramm-Rudman certainly hasn't helped. Much fewer than 10% of those needing English training could be served during the days of healthier funding, and cutbacks are making that worse. Soon we'll have more situations nationwide like the one at the Hollywood Adult School. The principal there recently told me more than five hundred adults are on a waiting list--waiting to enter a basic class in English.

LITERACY: A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Let's examine some of the "mythology" that often surrounds discussions of literacy. Two myths in particular cause serious damage: they cloud issues, create unrealistic expectations, and lead us down paths toward solutions that will not always work.

Myth Number One: The current school reform movement benefits our minority students. Reports such as "Nation at Risk" and most of the others that have followed have called our attention to the serious erosion in the quality and rigor of education. However, we notice a recurring theme in these reports: the best of our students are still not good enough. In order for our nation to stand strong in an increasingly complex and demanding world, we need to strengthen our teaching of the sciences, math and other areas. The response to such reports has been quick and strong across our nation. New and higher standards of academic excellence are being enforced, promotion and graduation requirements are being expanded, and course content is becoming more rigorous.

These new standards and requirements may be just fine for the students who cope with the old ones. But what about the students who were falling through the cracks before? All we are doing is making those cracks wider and deeper.

Dropout rates among language-minority students are already at crisis levels. Thirty-five percent of Hispanics ages 18 through 21 have dropped out of school. Dropout rates for Spanish-speakers in major metropolitan areas are staggering: Miami - 32%, Los Angeles - 50%, Chicago - 70%, New York - 80%. Between 1975 and 1982, Hispanic college enrollment declined by 16%.

So, Myth Number One doesn't wash. School reform at present is a threat to improved minority achievement. Somebody needs to commission a sequel to "Nation at Risk." Call it "Children at Risk," and let it tell us what every school must do to help each and every student achieve the new standards and requirements.

Myth Number Two: We have entered a technological and information age that requires new, higher levels of literacy. Well, we may read a lot about our new technological age, and the Sunday employment ads in <u>The Washington Post</u> certainly list lots of jobs in computers, engineering and information technologies. But if we really want to see where the future lies, we need only pass by our neighborhood fast food restaurant or convenience store. The signs that hang out front which read: "Hamburger, Fries and a Coke - $1.65," or "Try Our New Breakfast Bar," are more likely to read "Part-Time Help Wanted" or "Openings -Flexible Hours." My favorite is at a McDonald's: "Hiring - All Shifts - Earn Money -Make Friends."

The ten job categories that are creating the largest number of new jobs are: janitors, nurses' aides and orderlies, sales clerks, cashiers, waiters and waitresses, office clerks, nurses, food preparation and food service/fast food workers, secretaries, and truck drivers.

What's happening? We are running out of young people. The number of 18 to 24-year-olds available to enter the labor force is dropping and will continue to drop for several years. It's the result of the whole generation of baby boomers that delayed marriage and starting families. If that generation had settled down when its parents did, then we'd currently have plenty of teenagers available to do part-time work in our restaurants and supermarkets.

Yes, we're living in a technological society, but it doesn't demand very technological skills from most of us. The next time you're at your favorite fast food restaurant, peer over the cash register as your order is being rung up. Do you know what you're likely to find on the register keys? Little symbols of burgers, fries and sizes of drinks. Or think of your supermarket's checkout counter. They've probably installed that new machine that scans each item and electronically records the price. Has technology increased the skills needed by the supermarket cashier? On the contrary, the cashier is now little more than a bagger who holds items over a little electronic window before placing them in the bag.

We need to explode Myth Number Two and face a cold, hard reality. A small proportion of our future work force will indeed require more sophisticated skills in order to assume leadership roles in business, industry and government. But the vast majority of the future work force will not need these skills to enter the service occupations that are expanding. As disturbing as it may sound, there is little economic imperative for the improvement of literacy or the reduction of current drop-out rates in this country. If such an economic imperative existed, you can be sure that education funds would be expanded rather than cut back, and there would be less emphasis by the federal government on volunteer solutions to the problem of illiteracy.

We need to be especially mindful of this in our present decade, with its emphasis on cost-efficiency, the bottom line, self-reliance, and the prevailing wisdom that spending on social programs just fosters further dependency.

If there is no economic imperative for the improvement of literacy, then why bother? Because there is a social imperative, which is of greater urgency. Unless we implement dramatic reforms in our educational system, we are on the brink of creating a two-tiered society in this country: the literate haves and the illiterate have-nots. Minority youth with deficient skills may be able to drop out of high school and be gainfully employed in 1986, but how long will they be able or willing to stay in these entry-level service jobs? We are committing an entire generation of minority students to a lifetime of work in jobs that we would never wish on our own kids, except as part-time ways to earn some money during their school years.

The political life of our nation is also at risk if a vast segment of our citizenry does not have access to information because it lacks the skills to understand it. And no one can predict what we will reap if we allow this and future generations of language minorities to grow up in despair at the opportunities beyond their reach. This is our social bottom line, and it urgently commands our attention.

Given the magnitude of the literacy problem for limited-English-speakers, particularly those in our schools, we should consider the following principles and suggestions as we endeavor to enhance parent involvement in the education of their children.

First, we need to have realistic expectations. We may seek to get parents involved in order to improve the child's education, but we may find that the child is in many ways more capable than the parent. In so many refugee and immigrant families, the child is quick to pick up enough of the language to become the family communicator, answering the telephone, dealing with the landlord and the superintendent, doing the shopping and other errands. How many

times has the teacher of immigrant children heard that the student was absent because he took his father to the welfare office or she took her mother to the doctor? We should also not assume that the parent has much previous education or literacy skills in the native language. More than one school system has gone to the trouble of translating school manuals and sending home notices to parents in Spanish, only to find later that the parents were unable to read the information.

Second, we should remember that immigrant and refugee children often pick-up English fairly quickly, at least relative to the time it takes adults to master the language. The children become Americanized in a short time. They master the language. They seek to conform with a vengeance, in matters of dress, hairstyle, music, going out and hanging out. The children vigorously reject their parents' values. They are often frustrated by their parents' lack of English and embarrassed by their old country ways. Parental authority disintegrates and discipline problems arise, at home and at school. The outcome is too often child abuse by the parent, or substance abuse by the child.

Schools need to establish parent support groups that deal with these issues in the native language. Newcomer parents need to know about the cultural norms their children suddenly identify with, and the high value Americans place on the independence of their children. They also need effective strategies to handle discipline.

Schools should also develop parent-child cooperative activities that foster more positive relationships in the family. I suggest for your consideration the use of native language literacy projects, in which children help parents learn to read and write in the native language. Such an activity simultaneously develops the parents' skills, reminds the child of the worthiness of the native language and culture, and fosters a helping relationship between child and parent.

Third, we need to realize that the children who need our help the most are the ones who don't have a parent we can involve in our schools. So many of our Central American entrants, for example, find themselves living with an aunt or uncle, brother, sister, family friend, or just with other children. Or, even if one or both parents are in the household, each may be working up to two full-time jobs, in order to support the family here and other family members back in the native country. We must not be discouraged by poor rates of parent participation in our programs. We need to be creative in our scheduling, and we should consider setting up drop-in resource centers and other mechanisms to allow parents to flexibly access our services.

Fourth, our education programs must be part of a larger array of support systems and services: day care, medical care, employment services, consumer and legal assistance, counseling. We need to coordinate our efforts with the various community organizations that provide these services. And if any are not provided, we need to do something about that, because parents will only be able to respond to our efforts to the extent that these survival aspects of their lives are in order.

Fifth, we need to be aware of a key distinction within our limited-English school population--a distinction between our students who immigrated here and our students who were born and raised here in language minority neighborhoods. In a way, newcomers to this country have an advantage over those who are members of long-established minority groups. Newcomers were probably members of their majority culture back in their native country. They have not been subject to the

American minority experience. They have not inherited a legacy of discrimination, urban decay, and welfare dependency. Newcomers may indeed arrive here with a different culture, but it isn't the culture of American poverty. Their expectations are high, their motivation is high, and for them, the American dream is alive.

We face our greatest challenge then in our service to our long-established minority communities. We cannot motivate individual students or parents if the community itself is not motivated. We need to follow the lead of community-based organizations by involving parents in the design of our programs, rather than simply designing them ourselves and then hoping they will participate. Community outreach, therefore, doesn't mean the P.R. activity that we use to promote our programs. Community outreach means the ground-floor parent and community involvement we use to build our programs.

Sixth, high school reform comes too late for many of our children. Large numbers of our students are over age for their grade assignments, so they wind up dropping out before they even reach high school. We need to focus our energy and programs at the junior high/middle school level. These children are still our captive audience, and they are exploring the options before them.

Seventh, and finally, we must work in partnership with the private sector in our communities. Many of our students are working one or more part-time jobs. The late afternoon shift at Roy Rogers. The evening shift at the Seven-Eleven. School has become the day shift, and in the short term, it's a job that doesn't pay very well at all. When the need to help support the family is great, having a job on the side changes to going to school on the side, and that's one step away from leaving the school entirely.

Part-time work can be a wonderful education. The student gains important communication skills, deals with co-workers and customers, and experiences teamwork and organization. But let's assure that part-time work is integrated with school instruction and guidance about the world of work and career options. Let's involve parents as we discuss with children their study and work experiences and help them explore the directions in life they wish to take. And above all, let's assure that all our endeavors promote in our students a more positive self-image and a strong motivation to stay in school.

To sum up, we need to create opportunities for our students to succeed, and opportunities for their parents to play a role in that success. That is perhaps the greatest gift we as a professional community can offer to our students and their families.